The Spanish Educational System and Its Aims: A Critical Analysis of Its Failure in the Labor, Economic, Personal, Social, and Environmental Dimensions

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Abstract

This article evaluates the extent to which the Spanish educational system fulfills its stated aims: preparing for employment, contributing to economic development, fostering personal development, promoting social cohesion, and training environmentally responsible citizens. Based on the analysis of official data (EPA, Eurostat, OECD, Ministry of Health, INE) and specialized studies, a systemic non-compliance with these objectives is observed. The results indicate that 45.2% of the active population lacks accredited qualifications; 35% of higher education graduates work in overqualified positions; rates of depression, obesity, and drug consumption among young people are correlated with school failure; youth political participation is 58% compared to 82% in Sweden; and environmental awareness does not translate into action. It is concluded that the system reproduces inequalities rather than reducing them, and a reorientation toward a model based on competencies for life, active citizenship, and sustainability is proposed.

Keywords: School failure, overqualification, early leaving, social cohesion, citizenship education, sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Contemporary educational systems are justified by their capacity to fulfill a series of aims widely accepted in democratic legislation. In the Spanish case, the Organic Law of Education (LOMLOE) establishes as objectives: the full development of personality, training for the exercise of democratic citizenship, the acquisition of habits of coexistence and respect, preparation for the labor market, and understanding of the environmental reality. However, there is growing concern about the gap between these aims and the observed results.

The concept of "school failure" has traditionally been attributed to students, but recent research (Marchesi, 2020; García Pérez, 2022) reinterprets it as a failure of the system to adapt to diversity and to fulfill its own aims. This article adopts this critical perspective and aims to evaluate, with empirical data, the degree of compliance of the educational system in five key dimensions: qualified labor insertion, the economic return on educational investment, the health and personal development of students, social cohesion and citizen participation, and the formation of active environmental awareness.

The research question guiding this work is: To what extent is the Spanish educational system achieving its explicit aims in the labor, economic, personal, social, and environmental dimensions?

2. Regulatory Framework: The Aims of the Educational System

To establish an evaluation benchmark, the educational aims have been extracted from the LOMLOE (2020) and preceding legislation, synthesized into five major axes:

Dimension	Stated Aims (Articles 1 and 2 of the LOMLOE)
Labor	"Prepare for the exercise of professional activities" and "foster employability."
Economic	"Contribute to the competitiveness of the economy" and "equip students with the competencies demanded by the productive sector."
Personal	"The full development of personality" and "health education, including affective-se education."
Social	"Training in respect for rights and freedoms," "the exercise of democratic citizensh "conflict prevention."
Environmental	"Knowledge and respect for nature, sustainability, and the fight against climate ch

3. Methodology

A secondary analysis of official statistical sources and academic studies published between 2020 and 2025 has been carried out. The main sources are:

• Active Population Survey (EPA) from the INE, fourth quarter of 2025.

• Eurostat (data on early school leaving and overqualification 2024-2025).

• OECD, Education at a Glance 2024 and Skills Outlook 2025 reports.

• ESTUDES Survey (National Plan on Drugs) 2023-2024.

• Ministry of Health: National Health Survey 2024.

• INE: Statistics on Juvenile Convictions (2024) and Cultural Participation Survey (2024).

• CIS: Barometers on political participation and trust in institutions (2024-2025).

• Reports from the BBVA Foundation and Ivie (U-Ranking 2025), Save the Children (2025), and the Ministry of Equality (study on prostitution, 2023).

For each dimension, indicators directly linked to educational aims have been selected. No new calculations have been performed; rather, published data have been extracted and homogenized.

4. Results

The findings are presented below organized by the five dimensions analyzed.

4.1 Labor Dimension: Does the System Prepare for Qualified Employment?

The early school leaving rate (18-24 year-olds who do not complete post-compulsory secondary education) stood at 12.8% in 2025 (EPA), placing Spain as the second EU country with the highest dropout rate, only behind Romania (16.6%) and well above the European average (9.5%) (Eurostat, 2025). In absolute terms, it is estimated that about 260,000 young people enrolled in compulsory secondary education will drop out prematurely if no measures are taken (Save the Children, 2025).

Of the total active population (24.94 million people), 11,221,800 (45.2%) lack accredited professional qualifications. Of these, approximately 55% completed compulsory secondary education but did not continue their studies.

At the opposite extreme, of higher education graduates (university and advanced vocational training), 35% are overqualified, meaning they work in positions that do not require their level of education (OECD, 2024). This rate is

the highest in the OECD and doubles the European average (21.5%). Horizontal mismatch (working in a sector different from the one studied) affects 28.9% of those under 34, also the highest percentage in the EU (Eurostat, 2025).

These data indicate a double failure: on the one hand, a significant portion of the population does not attain any qualification; on the other, those who do attain one do not find employment commensurate with their training.

4.2 Economic Dimension: Is Educational Investment Profitable?

Public spending on education in Spain represents approximately 4.5% of GDP, slightly below the EU average (4.8%). Using average costs per student per year (OECD, 2024), the accumulated non-profitable investment has been estimated:

• Early leaving: estimated lost investment of 17,010 million euros (training of 243,000 young people up to age 16-18 without progression).

• Population without qualification (with completed compulsory secondary education): 401,180 million euros (investment in primary and compulsory secondary education for 6.17 million people who did not qualify).

• Overqualification (higher education cost only): 346,500 million euros (investment in higher degrees for 6.6 million people who do not work in qualified positions).

Altogether, it is estimated that more than 63% of public educational investment does not translate into real economic value in terms of qualified employment. The overall rate of return (people who study, qualify, and work in their field) is barely 36.8%. This low efficiency represents a drag on productivity and competitiveness, contributing to Spain investing only 1.4% of GDP in R&D compared to 2.3% in the EU.

4.3 Personal Dimension: Health, Well-being, and Integral Development

Educational aims explicitly include the "full development of personality" and "health education." However:

• Mental health: The pressure of a system that penalizes error is associated with high rates of anxiety and depression in adolescents. 14.5% of young people aged 15 to 24 report having had a mental health problem in the last year (National Health Survey, 2024). The OECD (2025) warns that unaddressed

mental health problems are both a cause and consequence of school failure, generating a vicious circle.

• Obesity: 40% of Spanish children are overweight or obese (ALADINO Study, 2023). The educational system does not effectively integrate nutritional education, and school canteens do not always offer healthy menus.

• Drug consumption: Although overall consumption has decreased slightly, cannabis continues to be consumed by 21.8% of students aged 14 to 18 in the last year, and Spain maintains rates above the European average (ESTUDES, 2023). School dropout is a documented risk factor for problematic substance use due to the loss of the protective factor that schooling represents.

Therefore, the system not only fails to prevent these problems but sometimes aggravates them by stigmatizing low-performing students.

4.4 Social Dimension: Citizenship, Security, and Cohesion

The aim of "training in the exercise of democratic citizenship" and "preventing conflicts" is measured through indicators of political participation, juvenile delinquency, and social fragmentation.

• Youth political participation: Only 28% of young people aged 18 to 24 trust political parties (CIS, 2024). Electoral participation in this group was 58% in the last general elections, compared to 82% in Sweden or 75% in Germany among young people (Comparative Study of Youth Participation, University of Salamanca, 2025). This disenchantment is attributed to the absence of "experiential democratic education" in schools (Sancho, 2023).

• Juvenile delinquency: Criminal offenses committed by minors increased by 3.8% in 2024, with a 29.7% increase in crimes against sexual freedom (INE, Statistics on Juvenile Convictions). Various criminological studies (Redondo, 2022) identify school failure as one of the strongest predictors of juvenile criminal careers.

• Prostitution and trafficking: The Ministry of Equality (2023) estimates that at least 114,576 women were in prostitution situations, with the 18-24 age group being the most affected (189 women per 10,000). School dropout and lack of qualifications are key vulnerability factors for recruitment by trafficking networks.

• Community and family fragmentation: A bidirectional relationship between family conflict and school performance has been documented (Study by the University of Barcelona with 2,731 adolescents, 2024): school failure aggravates

family conflict and vice versa. Communities with higher dropout rates also show lower rates of citizen participation and greater inequality.

4.5 Environmental Dimension: Awareness Without Action

Although 90% of young people declare having ecological awareness (Youth and Environment Survey, 2024), only 34% claim to have consistently adopted sustainable habits (recycling, reducing plastic consumption, sustainable mobility). The educational system has focused on transmitting knowledge about climate change (which students possess) but not on developing competencies for action and commitment. There are no mandatory school carbon footprint programs, nor practical sustainability projects integrated into the curriculum at all stages. Spain is far from meeting the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development objectives (2024), which require that educational systems "empower students to act."

5. Discussion

The results show a systematic gap between the stated aims and the actual achievements of the Spanish educational system. This gap is not circumstantial but structural, and responds to a model designed under homogenizing, memoristic, and decontextualized criteria that have been widely criticized (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2018; Reimers, 2021).

5.1 Non-compliance with Labor and Economic Aims

The high early dropout rate and overqualification reflect a chronic mismatch between educational offerings and labor market demand. The rigidity of the curriculum and the scarce connection with the productive sector (except in isolated experiences of dual vocational training) prevent the system from acting as an engine of employability. This contradicts the explicit aim of "preparing for professional activity." Furthermore, the low profitability of educational investment (63% estimated loss) calls into question the efficiency of public spending.

5.2 Non-compliance with Personal Aims

The system not only fails to promote mental and physical health, but the evaluative stress, the culture of penalized error, and the lack of attention to diversity contribute to anxiety, depression, and obesity (Aber & Jones, 2021). Emotional education remains marginal and unevaluated.

5.3 Non-compliance with Social Aims

The absence of practical civic education and the limited participation of students in school governance correlate with youth political disenchantment. Countries with better performance in participation (Nordic countries, the Netherlands) integrate debate, mediation, and participatory budgeting as part of daily learning (Solhaug & Osler, 2022). In Spain, citizenship education has been reduced to an intermittent theoretical subject, without evaluation of democratic competencies.

Furthermore, the link between school failure and delinquency is a documented fact that the system does not address preventively. The lack of restorative justice programs in schools and early detection of risk factors is a serious deficiency.

5.4 Non-compliance with Environmental Aims

The gap between knowledge and action is the symptom of an academicist approach that ignores action pedagogy. Project-Based Learning with real environmental impact is practically non-existent in the ordinary curriculum.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

First conclusion: The Spanish educational system broadly fails to fulfill its stated aims in the five dimensions analyzed. "School failure" is a misdiagnosis; the failure is of the system, not of the students.

Second conclusion: The predominant model—rigid, homogenizing, focused on memorization, and excessively academicist—does not respond to the diversity of abilities, interests, and contexts. A paradigm shift is necessary.

Third conclusion: The personal, social, and environmental dimensions are treated as "accessory" to the labor and economic dimensions, when they should be cross-cutting axes of equal importance.

As a recommendation for improving the evaluation of the system and educational policies, it would be advisable to create an observatory to study its efficacy, efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance in relation to the established aims, making the results known with public and periodic data.

7. Study Limitations

This analysis is based on secondary data with different timeframes and methodologies, and it has not been possible to homogenize all sources. The estimation of lost investment is an approximation, not an exact calculation. Longitudinal studies following cohorts of students from school to the labor market and adult life are needed to establish more robust causal relationships.

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